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Victorian Representations of War

Part I—Mythifying Wars

Behind the Myth: The Representation of the Crimean War in Nineteenth-century British Newspapers, Government Archives & Contemporary Records

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Résumé

The objective of this contribution is to analyse the discrepancies between different contemporary sources (the national press, government papers and some individuals' accounts) regarding the representation of the Crimean war. It appears that the representation of this war changed considerably between 1854 and 1856: it was overall fairly misleading and partial. The national press and the public opinion were too optimistic although the British government and the army were largely unprepared for this major operation. The representation of the war was misleading because the government tried to cover up the incompetence of some senior officers and the disorganization of the army administration. The poor condition of British servicemen and the hazardous nature of the Crimean venture were revealed by press reports and individuals' accounts. In the end prominent historians consider the Crimean war was in many aspects useless and costly; the argument of this paper is that painful historical truth came to be hidden in the depth of Britain's national consciousness, behind a few comforting Victorian myths.

Texte intégral



Introduction

- 1 The Crimean war (1854–1856) was the first European war after 40 years of peace: it was also the first modern war because of the massive use of new weapons such as rifles and shell guns which caused heavy casualties. This war also benefited from the use of new means of communications, i.e. the electric telegraph which allowed instant contact between army commanders and politicians (a feature not always welcomed by the former) and between press correspondents and the public. It was extensively covered by influential Victorian media such as the Times.
- 2 A coalition composed of Britain, France, Turkey, was opposed to Russia. The main cause of this war was the great powers' rivalries in the Middle East: Britain feared that Russia could control the Eastern Mediterranean and create an Eastern Empire that would challenge British supremacy in India. The war lasted three years and was very costly and bloody, yet the peace solved nothing: in 1856 the geopolitical situation in the Middle East remained more or less the same. That is why the Crimean War is often considered by military historians as one of the most useless wars ever fought.
- 3 It also saw a remarkable level of military incompetence as soldiers of all the armies engaged in that conflict suffered appalling sanitary and living conditions in the Crimea caused by poor medical facilities, inadequate clothing and equipment, and failure to prepare for a long war.
- 4 That is why the British decided that they would rather forget the Crimean War: after the war, all these troublesome questions faded away. More comforting myths came to dominate the accepted view of the war such as the heroic charge of the Light Cavalry Brigade against Russian guns or the patriotic self-sacrifice of British nurses led by Florence Nightingale, "the lady with the lamp". For some historians these misrepresentations do reveal the desire on the part of the whole British nation to forget her failures and painful memories about the Crimea, which do not fit into the popular representation of the Victorian period as an era of prosperity, power and influence.
- 5 The first objective of this paper, largely based on the exploitation of contemporary archives and documents, is to point to the misrepresentation of many essential aspects of the Crimean War as seen from the archives of the British government and contemporary press accounts: the argument of this paper is that there was, in the early period of the Crimean campaign, misrepresentation of the war by the British government (partly from ignorance or incompetence, and partly for political reasons) and by the Press (for ideological reasons and commercial reasons). Its second objective is to show the importance of the different sources that allowed historians to ascertain such misrepresentations, e.g. private individuals' accounts and papers, like soldiers' and nurses' letters. These documents may allow us to discover the truth behind the myth.

1 The Misrepresentations During the War

1.1 Misrepresentations in the Press

- 6 The Press was in the early period of the war very optimistic about the outcome of the venture: this attitude largely contributed to a widespread euphoria,¹ a war fever, an anti-Russian hatred, and the formation of a dominant war party in Britain, led by Lord Palmerston, at the expense of Lord Aberdeen in 1854. This war fervour generated a general hostility against all supporters of peace:²

The war was popular not only with the crowds, particularly the urban crowds, and the politicians, particularly the Radical politicians, but also with most of the poets and writers of the time.³

- 7 Contemporaries expected the war to be one of the greatest events in the history of the world: the British were eager to prove that a parliamentary government with a free press could defeat an authoritarian one.⁴ The *Times* was the leading medium of this great crusade:⁵ it was the main national newspaper with a circulation of 40,000 copies. It formed and reflected the English public opinion. The Press was subject to no censorship and it had an enormous influence. It quickly realized that readers welcomed sensational revelations more enthusiastically than bare factual information. For example, the *Illustrated London News* published many articles encouraging the war and prophesying a rapid victory of the Anglo-French alliance. Russia was presented as a despotic anti-parliamentarian regime, economically backward, contrasting with the democratic regimes of France and Britain, embodying modern civilization and peace. But the Press and the war party carefully discarded the fact that Turkey, which was allied to Britain and France, was essentially a tyrannical regime (the issue of Britain's support for the Ottoman Empire was very sensitive as many in the British political elites despised the Ottomans and Islam in general):

the Emperor of Russia, with a contemptuous insolence, unbecoming his position . . . the wicked disturber of the peace of the world . . . the Imperial Barbarian, whose pretensions are an outrage to Europe, and an insult to the right feeling and common sense of mankind . . . the struggle will immediately commence and the most ardent wish, the most sincere prayer of every honest man in the civilized world will be formed for the speedy downfall of the Imperial Barbarian.⁶

- 8 Moreover Russia was depicted as an expansionist power that endangered the equilibrium of international affairs. Any extension of Russia's influence in the Middle East would, in the eyes of the Allies, change the balance of power in Europe and threaten general peace. The threat of the increase of Russia's power and a general reaction⁷ to a long period of peace explain the popular enthusiasm for the war:

In resisting the felonious designs of the Czar against the dominions of his neighbour [Turkey] the British and French nations do not simply resist the ambitions of an unscrupulous despot, who sets all considerations of justice at defiance, but they take arms in defence of a sacred principle, upon the recognition of which the tranquillity and the civilization of the world depend.⁸

- 9 The roots of Russophobia lay in the immediate period that followed the Napoleonic Wars, when influential politicians interpreted for the public⁹ the danger of the development of the Russian empire:

between 1815 and 1830, writers like Sir Robert Wilson and George de Lacy Evans had argued that the Russian objective was Constantinople and that once Constantinople was captured, universal dominion lay within Russia's "easy grasp". They familiarized important sections of the reading public with the view that only enslaved peoples anxious for their liberation could drive the semi-barbarous Russian despots back into the steppes of Asia.¹⁰

- 10 Actually Britain, the first industrial and economic power, wanted to secure her control of the East Indies and impose order on the rest of the world, while France wanted to assert her power in Europe. According to Alain Gouttman, a prominent historian of the Crimean war, the war party was very close to the leading financial and economic circles of the City of London and the East India Company. The war party set unrealistic objectives¹¹ to the army, publicised in the press, e.g. the capture of Sebastopol and the Crimea. That is why, during the siege of Sebastopol, the British press was divided in two groups: first, the partisans of a massive and immediate attack, and those who favoured a siege of the city. The Allies eventually adopted an intermediate strategy, i.e. a siege with some operations that would prepare the final attack. Journalists excited the public opinion and the government, by pressing for the first option. They aimed at exercising an influence on the government and on the development of the war: for them the progress of the siege was too slow. The partisans

of peace, like Lord John Russell, resented the antagonism of the Press and the collusion between certain ministers and the *Times*:

Molesworth, a Cabinet minister and not a very discreet one is an intimate friend of Mr Delane . . . Mr Lowe, a Privy Councillor . . . conveys to Mr Delane (unfaithfully it is said) a report of every conversation he hears in the House of Commons or in clubs . . . an unsuccessful battle with the Press would lower the legislature . . . I have not explained what I mean by the House of Commons asserting its own power. I mean that where the House of Commons has an opinion, it should disregard the newspapers.¹²

- 11 The allied commanders were under the pressure of the French and British public opinion and acted accordingly: in June 1855 a major hasty assault against Sebastopol was decided; it failed¹³ and caused a great loss of lives. The *Times* did not hesitate to attack the government and the army leadership, in very harsh terms. For instance Lord Raglan and his successor in June 1855, Sir James Simpson, were often accused of being too timorous:

No one regrets that he [General Simpson] has ceased to be commander-in-chief of this army. . . he failed in determination and firmness in a matter of vital importance to our army when opposed to a sterner will, greater vehemence and force of character . . . the late general was a victim to writing, like his lamented predecessor.¹⁴

- 12 We must now evoke the anti-Russian press campaign which contributed to the general ill-will about Russia in Britain: in the British press, the Russian army and soldiers were systematically presented as backward, ill-equipped and disrespectful of the rules of war; they were like barbarians on the battle field; such articles inflamed the indignation and anger of the reading public and the general war fever:

Evidence is being collected at the hospitals of the barbarity of the Russians on the field towards our wounded . . . I know one instance in which an officer who had been previously unhorsed by a musket shot in the knee received no less than 16 bayonet wounds, besides being beaten with the but end of muskets, while alone in the hands of the enemy and quite defenceless.¹⁵

- 13 The British press published several articles denouncing the attitude of Russian commanders who had abandoned their wounded soldiers. It was part of the anti-Russian campaign. Actually this was a normal practice in both armies. After battles, many soldiers were left behind because they were too seriously mutilated and both armies had no effective transport system for the sick and wounded:

In a long low room, supported by square pillars arched at the top, and dimly lighted through shattered and unglazed window-frames, lay the wounded Russians, who had been abandoned to our mercies by their General **. . . these poor fellows, who had served their loving friend and master, the Czar, but too well, were consigned to their terrible fate . . . what must have the wounded felt who were obliged to endure all this and who passed away without a hand to give them a cup of water, or a voice to say one kindly word to them?¹⁶

- 14 The war fever thus prevented the possibility of a peace in August 1854, after a partial Russian withdrawal: the public opinion was unwilling to accept a negotiation or a premature peace.

- 15 It is generally acknowledged that the press played a key role by informing the public of the strategies of the different protagonists and the condition of servicemen.¹⁷ It provided impatient readers with detailed accounts of battles¹⁸ and skirmishes opposing the Allies and Russia. Many of these accounts extolled national pride, and increased the confidence of the public: for instance, the *Times* and the *ILN* praised the heroism, the courage of British servicemen on the battlefield. The war enhanced the prestige of the individual soldier, who appeared as a crusader in the cause of right. These detailed and realistic press accounts informed the public of the "realities" of war and aroused the pity and emotions of readers who came to love and support the men who fought for them:

A sergeant who had been in the very midst of the deadly struggle thus describes how he felt when he went home to the camp and found none of his comrades there:—... there was one of our poor fellows, lying on the ground beside some that were dead, with both his thighs shot through, one of which was fractured very much. He did not even utter a groan, but simply said, "Sergeant, is there any chance for us tonight?"—I said, "We will come back and fetch you;" but the night was so dark that we could not find him, neither did anybody else, so he had to lie all the next day; but the poor fellow has since died of his wounds.¹⁹

- 16 This appalling story indirectly reveals one of the many defects of the organization²⁰ of the British army: it had, contrary to the French, no means of transport for the wounded²¹ men, to carry them from the battlefield to the hospitals. In 1854 the administration of the army was in the hands of a Colonial Secretary who devolved some parliamentary responsibilities to a War Secretary. The Supply Service was the responsibility of the Commissariat Department,²² a department of the Treasury which had not been reformed since the end of the Napoleonic Wars and was ill-equipped to move and supply an army of 30,000 men. There was simply no effective Transport Service in the British army. Moreover army forces in Britain were insufficient comprising only 45,000 men: most of the troops served in India. Public expenditure on the army had been cut by four²³ between 1815 and 1854. The army was not a popular calling among the working classes. In a word Britain was not prepared to fight a major war in Europe,²⁴ despite the praises of the *Times* which called it "the finest army that has ever left these shores."²⁵ The Press did not realize that the army was unprepared; on the contrary in 1854 it presented it as one of the best modern European armies. For example the embarkation of troops in British ports did not, according to the Press, cause any specific trouble:

this long threatened enterprise—one of the most gigantic military movements ever undertaken—has, at last, been effected, so far as regards the embarkation of troops and artillery, under the most favourable circumstances²⁶
Mr Commissary-General Filder deserves the greatest praise for his exertions in supplying our men with food. The stories which have been circulating respecting the insufficiency and irregularity of the supply of meat, biscuit and spirits, are base calumnies. No army was ever fed with more punctuality, and no army I believe was ever so well fed under such very exceptional circumstances.²⁷

- 17 Actually no plans for embarking men and supplies had been made:²⁸ articles which would be needed immediately on disembarkation were loaded first; when the first British soldiers landed in the Crimea they had no adequate equipment with them: no winter clothes,²⁹ no food, no tents. Contemporary army accounts³⁰ indicate that many problems did occur in Balaklava harbour. Moreover the army leadership had no intelligence information³¹ about the strength of the Russian army and no precise maps of the interior of the Crimea: it lacked sufficient detail to plan any strategy.
- 18 So these press accounts were in many cases inaccurate: they often used clichés³² (e.g. the heroism and strength of the British soldiers) which contrasted with reality. Henry Clifford, an officer, had a much different opinion of his men; they were brave but lacked some important qualities:

... you must not look upon the soldier as a responsible agent, for he is not able to take care of himself, he must be fed, clothed, looked after like a child and given only just enough to make him efficient as part of the great machine of war. Give him one farthing more than he really wants, and he gives way to his brutal propensities and immediately gets drunk.³³

- 19 Another telling instance challenges this ideal image of the British soldier: after the battles of the Alma and Balaklava, some British regiments plundered³⁴ luxury goods and furniture in the houses of local aristocrats. This is not surprising given that many British soldiers were misfits, former vagrants, criminals,³⁵ unemployed hands. These incidents were not reported by the British press correspondents (e.g. the *Morning Chronicle*).

- 20 Newspapers also tended to sweep aside the tactical blunders or mistakes of the British commanding officers: military experts agree on the fact that the British infantry was extremely disciplined and brave, but their outdated tactics did not fit modern industrial warfare.³⁶ They showed too often a lack of initiative and mobility, e.g. during the battle of the Alma, they marched slowly and steadily, in perfect order, towards the Russians, instead of running to them, and suffered many casualties.³⁷ Another significant example, probably the most famous, is the charge of the light cavalry brigade against the Russian guns during the battle of Balaclava (25 October 1854): it is now widely acknowledged that this elite regiment mistakenly charged the heavy Russian guns, and suffered huge casualties. There were many different factors which caused the loss of this cavalry brigade, but the most decisive one was probably the old enmity³⁸ between the head of the light brigade (the Earl of Cardigan) and his direct commanding officer, the Earl of Lucan. The latter received a confused written order from Lord Raglan and did not seriously discuss it with his subordinates. He misinterpreted it and ordered the fatal charge.
- 21 This event reveals the incompetence³⁹ of many British commanding officers: most were old⁴⁰, inexperienced. Many wealthy and incompetent officers had bought⁴¹ their commissions (except in the Royal Artillery and the Royal Engineers, two highly professional corps) and their regiments, like the Earl of Lucan or the Earl of Cardigan,⁴² and were not interested⁴³ in modern military science and tactics. Moreover they cared little about their men. Sadly enough these wealthy inexperienced officers promoted themselves over more experienced and able but less wealthy colleagues.
- 22 The charge of the light brigade was reinterpreted by British poets, like Alfred Tennyson, the poet laureate, who presented it as a glorious and heroic feat on the part of brave cavalymen, who were among the best horsemen of Europe:

In the experiences of war Tennyson discerned a purging of base ambitions, an escape from selfish individualism, and even a strange but relentless moral necessity.⁴⁴

- 23 Lord Cardigan, the hero of the charge, was an incompetent and egoistic officer. Nevertheless the unreasonable mad charge of the light brigade was transformed in the British collective psyche into a classical cavalry battle,⁴⁵ well-fought by both parties, which eventually was won by the Russians. The stupidity of the fatal order that led to the charge was played down and the blind courage of the light brigade brought to centre stage;⁴⁶ William Howard Russell, the chief correspondent of the *Times* in the East, described these horsemen in these terms: "they swept proudly past, glittering in the morning sun in all the pride and splendour of war . . . their desperate valour knew no bonds."⁴⁷ In fact it must be said that the cavalry had limited effectiveness during the war: they were usually kept to the flanks and their main function was reconnaissance. It was agreed that any other task would cause heavy casualties to them.
- 24 In the same way the battle of Inkerman, won by the Allies, was celebrated by the British press as a great success: the accounts of the battle by the *Times* give the impression that the British were the chief protagonists⁴⁸ and defeated the Russians themselves, without any support from the French; indeed Russell, who wrote these articles, was anti-French, and used extensively the official despatches sent by Lord Raglan to the War Secretary, the Duke of Newcastle. But Raglan did not mention the decisive role⁴⁹ of the French regiments led by General Bosquet which changed the outcome of the battle. The British press did not check the accuracy of this despatch; the battle of Inkerman, in the minds of the British, became a British success.
- 25 Moreover the logistical support⁵⁰ provided by the French army to the British during the long siege of Sebastopol was often discarded in the accounts of British war correspondents. It remains that in the winter 1854–1855, this assistance was much welcomed and appreciated by British servicemen. Eventually, when Sebastopol was taken⁵¹ in September 1855 by the Allies, a controversy⁵² emerged between the French and British public opinions and media concerning the actual penetration of the British forces into the Great Redan, one of the main bastions of Sebastopol: it appears, from all

the testimonies of French officers that the British troops reached the high walls of the Great Redan but had to retreat thereafter. The British newspapers later had to admit that the French forces (which totalled four times the British expeditionary corps and were the best-equipped and trained in Europe) had won the battle themselves, anyhow the British press, e.g. the *Morning Advertiser*, underplayed⁵³ the achievement of the French by saying that Sebastopol was actually just a preliminary operation, before the final defeat of the Russian navy at Cronstadt. The nationalistic war party in Britain was looking for its revenge, being eager to demonstrate that the Royal Navy could still play a decisive role in the war against Russia. For the *Times*, Britain needed a victory of its own. But it did not happen: in the end France chose to make peace with Russia and Britain could not continue without her. She thought she had been betrayed by France.

- 26 The press discovered after a few months that only one-sixth of all deaths in the Crimea had been caused by battles and that disease (cholera mainly) was the main killer; from then on its attention was directed to Florence Nightingale: in October 1854 Sydney Herbert, the then Secretary at War, instructed her to travel to the Crimea and place herself under the orders and directions of the Chief Army Medical Officer of the Hospital at Scutari. She had to direct the nursing establishment. She rapidly became a sort of icon, a female hero in Victorian Britain thanks to her sanitary work⁵⁴ in the hospitals in the Crimea, and to the media: the latter, from the end of 1854, praised her action and devotion in the service of British soldiers. The *Illustrated London News* played a key role in the making of this myth because everyone in the UK wanted to see a sketch of the “lady with the lamp”:

We have. . . taken the most direct means of obtaining a sketch of this excellent lady, in the dress she now wears, in one of the “corridors of the sick” in the hospital at Scutari.⁵⁵

- 27 The *ILN* extolled her achievements and Nightingale came to represent the ideal Victorian woman who had fled to the Crimea to alleviate the sufferings and hardships of British soldiers, and who single-handedly took on the military establishment in order to establish decent hospitals and professional nursing staff; her example, her “self-sacrifice” resulted in many applications to the War Office from British middle class women who were eager to follow her example and travel to the seat of war:

Wherever there is disease in its most dangerous form . . . there is that incomparable woman sure to be seen; her benignant presence is an influence for good comfort even amid the struggles of expiring nature. She is a “ministering angel” without any exaggeration in these hospitals, and as her slender form glides quietly along each corridor, every poor fellow’s face softens with gratitude at the sight of her. When all the medical officers have retired for the night . . . she may be observed alone, with a little lamp in her hand, making her solitary rounds . . . With the heart of a true woman, and the manners of a lady, accomplished and refined beyond most of her sex, she combines a surprising calmness of judgment and promptitude and decision of character.⁵⁶

- 28 But Florence Nightingale came to overshadow all the other nurses and women who went to the Crimea and in some cases she was credited with actions and undertakings that others had initiated or actually achieved.⁵⁷ She also came to be beyond criticism. Actually she was not the first pioneer in the field of nursing reform⁵⁸ in 19th century Britain: there were already religious nursing orders in Britain. Some nurses who accompanied her or who arrived in the Crimea after her did also much to improve the sanitary situation in the hospitals of the Crimea: Mary Stanley led a party of 33 Protestant nurses in November 1854. There were also the groups of nuns from the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of Charity. Lady Stratford, the wife of the British ambassador at Constantinople, organized 125 workmen to renovate the new wards in the hospital at Scutari. Mary Seacole, a mulatto, brought much comfort to the soldiers too and was given no official recognition.

- 29 Furthermore some modern scholars⁵⁹ have questioned the personal achievements of Florence Nightingale: for F. B. Smith,⁶⁰ she had very little talent for leading and

coordinating subordinate staff and raising⁶¹ *esprit de corps*, and was more concerned with the cause of army sanitary reform⁶² than with the work of nursing which had launched her as a public figure. He also denounces her manipulative⁶³ approach to human relationships: she was appointed as Superintendent of the Nursing Establishment in the East thanks to her personal links with Sydney Herbert's wife and with Lady Palmerston. But in November 1855 she had become the symbol of nursing care and could not be criticised or replaced (the Nightingale Fund had been opened to public subscription).

- 30 It remains that Florence Nightingale had a complex personality: scholars have rightly denounced her contempt for her nurses, her refusal to receive Mary Stanley's party of nurses (authorized by Sidney Herbert), her bitter denunciation of Herbert for "betraying her". She was jealous of her position:

... you came to me in your distress, and told me that you were unable for the moment to find any other person for the office ... I sacrificed my own judgment and went out with 40 females ... I have by incessant vigilance day and night, introduced something like system into the disorderly operations of these women ... at this point of affairs arrives, at no one's requisition, a fresh batch of women, raising our number to 84. You have sacrificed the cause, so near my heart. You have sacrificed me, a matter of small importance now. You have sacrificed your own written word to a popular cry. I will not say anything of the cruel injustice to me ...⁶⁴

- 31 Finally, during the winter 1854–5, Lord Raglan became the object of many criticisms about his own conduct of the war and his attitude to his men. The *Times*, the *Daily News*, the *Morning Herald*, and other London and provincial newspapers published letters of disgruntled junior officers and soldiers who although they did not have all the details of the overall situation bitterly criticised the government and army leaders.⁶⁵ John Delane, the editor of the *Times*, even distributed Russell's letters (criticizing Raglan) to members of the Cabinet⁶⁶ who were anxious to justify themselves personally and collectively:

Things have gone mad here ... the political world is quite crazy. The Press, which for its own ends exaggerates the sufferings of our troops, has made the nation quite furious.⁶⁷

1.2 Misrepresentations in Official Documents

- 32 These criticisms do not bear examination when we explore the numerous general orders⁶⁸ issued by the British army headquarters at Sebastopol in 1856: we are particularly impressed by the intense activity of Lord Raglan who was well aware of the growing difficulties faced by his men in the Crimea: he spent much energy trying to correct administrative deficiencies.

- 33 But Christopher Hibbert thinks that Raglan tended to underestimate his needs and difficulties in his despatches to the government, an attitude which was later detrimental to his own credibility:⁶⁹ in January 1855 the War Secretary, the Duke of Newcastle, was becoming impatient. He demanded explanations⁷⁰ about the shortage of food, the problems of inland transport, the hardships suffered by regiments. Raglan's critics even said he had attempted to deceive the government by issuing inaccurate despatches:

your notices of the condition of your army are brief and unsatisfactory ... while clothing and medical stores are in abundance at Balaklava, your troops have been suffering all the miseries of cold, and your sick all those melancholy consequences which the want of medicines occasion ... it would appear that your visits to the camp were few and far between.⁷¹

- 34 For example after the loss of the light brigade, Raglan did not put the blame on the Earl of Lucan in his official despatch to the government: he rather emphasized the glory and heroism of the charge. He only wrote that there had been "some misconception of

the instruction to advance⁷² on the part of Lucan. Likewise a general order⁷³ dated 17 April 1856 and signed by Raglan states that “the army continues to preserve its discipline and efficiency”.

- 35 Actually Raglan knew too well that this correspondence⁷⁴ would not remain confidential: he took great care to keep his military secrets from the enemy. He was suspicious of the press, especially the *Times*, a view shared by his commanders who thought that this newspaper was providing useful information⁷⁵ to the enemy:

... the thoughtless activity of a correspondent ... minute details of lines and works, strength and garrisons ... however old and incorrect they may be, published for our enemies lips and for the interest and amusement of the people of England.⁷⁶

- 36 It did not mean that the *Times* articles were inaccurate: government records produced between September 1854 and January 1855 indicate that the War Department had been informed very soon of the problems of army transports and troops:

... incompetence of the agents chosen for the different services connected with this expedition and with the war in general ... our commissariat ... was unaccountably neglected—the man at the head of it is far too old ... no man properly acquainted with the languages and resources of the country has been selected to accompany the army ... in spite of every warning we selected the most unhealthy spots to encamp our troops ... the result has naturally been a terrible sacrifice of human life.⁷⁷

- 37 We have seen that some junior officers and soldiers expressed their criticisms about the conduct of the war through anonymous articles in the press. Some senior officers, who had the same intention, were warned by the government. For example, in December 1855, Lord Ellenborough cautioned Lieutenant-Colonel Beatson against publishing any public document in any pamphlet sent to the press (Beatson had expressed his fears and doubts in a newspaper article): “I have a strong feeling of objection to any appeal to the press on the part of a military officer.”⁷⁸

- 38 Other officials misrepresented the situation in the Crimea: the British ambassador at Constantinople, Lord Stratford de Redcliffe (1786–1880) is remembered as an able and competent diplomat who informed the British government about the situation in the Middle East in 1854. He did much to shape British policy towards Turkey. Yet he underestimated the situation: despite mounting problems in 1854, his despatches to the government remained optimistic: he tried to convince the Foreign Office that the sanitary situation in military hospitals in the East was under control, which was not the case if we compare his letters to Florence Nightingale’s letters:

When I last visited the hospital and barracks ... I found an appearance of considerable improvement in the state of arrangements ... Those with whom I conversed, and they were not few, spoke with cheerfulness and contentment; and the medical attendants assured me that, with the assistance they had already received, they were sufficiently numerous to attend, not only to the British, but to the sick and wounded Russians.⁷⁹

- 39 Army doctors too, in the early months of the war, issued official despatches which stated that they were quite able to cope with the situation: in 1854 Dr Hall, the Inspector General of Hospitals, did not agree that anything serious had gone wrong in his department,⁸⁰ a view shared by Dr Menzies, the Medical Officer of Health at Scutari:

I beg to state that every preparation ... was in readiness to alleviate the sufferings of both sick and wounded ... there was no want of either linen or bandages, but an ample supply of both ... there never was such a tissue of falsehood fabricated.⁸¹

- 40 Indeed at that time the medical department of the army resented any intrusion on the part of journalists and civilians like Florence Nightingale. The latter believed that Raglan was misinformed by Dr Hall, the Principal MOH. For Trevor Royle, a military

historian, this department “was a law unto itself and composed of doctors who thought that they knew best.”⁸²

2 Behind the Myth

2.1 The new Role of the Press

- 41 Between October and December 1854, the *Times* undertook a complete volte-face. It denounced⁸³ the inadequate sanitary arrangements of the Ambulance service and of army hospitals, crowded and ill-equipped:

... it was recently announced ... that a certain medical officer, Dr Lawson by name, who had recently fallen under the severe censure of the commander-in-chief for professional misconduct, had actually been appointed, notwithstanding this stigma on his character, to the superintendence of the great hospital at Scutari ... despite the acknowledged devotion of individuals, so great has been the want of provision, management, or direction, that our disabled soldiers have been unnecessarily exposed to the most dreadful sufferings.⁸⁴

- 42 The situation on board hospital transports at sea was appalling⁸⁵ too. The press revealed the incompetence of the army administration, i.e. the disorganization of the Commissariat, that caused the sufferings and hardships of men, e.g. the difficult winter endured by British troops, ill-equipped, badly supported from home:

Our victory [at the Alma] has been glorious ... but there has been a great want of proper medical attention; the wounded were left, some for two nights, the whole for one, on the field. From the battle they have been bundled on board ship by 600 and 700, without any proper means for removing the wounded from the field ... the number of lives which have been sacrificed by the want of proper arrangements and neglect must be considerable.⁸⁶

- 43 The *Times* published numerous soldiers' letters which revealed that they were living in flooded trenches for days, slept in the open and survived on an inadequate diet: they had no vegetables in their rations. The continued use of salt meat aggravated the diseases of men.⁸⁷ Cases of scurvy and dysentery were commonplace. Likewise, the many discharged or wounded men who came back to Britain informed relatives and friends of the realities of war in the Crimea; the latter were given a fair description of the situation of the army that contrasted with the optimistic and cheerful articles issued in the first months of the war.

- 44 This u-turn was facilitated by the absence of censorship on the part of the government and the military; these were ideal conditions for the war correspondents who could produce lengthy and detailed accounts which were speedily despatched to London. Anyhow it seems that William Russell and John Delane tended to attribute too much skill and control to the High Command; their articles often contained many mistakes, errors and omissions, which were corrected by officers' and soldiers' letters to the editor.

2.2 Officers' Books

- 45 After the war some army officers published detailed accounts of their experiences in the Crimea and their testimonies are invaluable sources for historians: they have the benefit of hindsight and are more balanced than the soldiers' and junior officers' letters published by the *Times* during the war. For instance George Ranken provides a compassionate, more human, image of the Russian soldiers who were often serfs enrolled forcibly in the Czar's army:

I saw hundreds of Russians slain, lying in every attitude of agony over the ground . . . : some of them, poor fellows, near the crests of the heights which they had so gallantly tried to storm . . . these poor serfs were clothed in the rudest fashion; they had no socks, but merely a bit of canvas wrapped round the foot . . . their grey coats were worn and dingy; the bread they carried resembled earth . . .
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- 46 Russians were very brave, despite their poor equipment and training, contrary to anti-Russian articles published by the British press:

The Russian army fought with desperate courage. A French officer told Nicholson today, that after the French had carried the Malakhoff, a Russian officer and forty men in a pit near the centre, refused to surrender, and fought till nearly all were killed.⁸⁹

- 47 These senior officers understood that the British army was no longer capable of undertaking any operation because its logistical support had collapsed through lack of foresight and gross incompetence. George Ranken describes very well the feelings of the British troops during the long siege of Sebastopol, while the war fervour and the impatience for victory were most intense in Britain:

Everybody is sick of the siege, with its perpetual hammering, and the gradual daily consumption of life in the hot, dusty trenches, apparently to all the world in general without any result⁹⁰

Death is spoken of with such indifference out here and treated necessarily as such an ordinary everyday event of war, that one loses in some measure the horror one feels of it in peaceful times. I thought the spectacle of a battle-field would be more dreadful than it really was. I have found the sight of suffering far more distressing than that of death . . . ⁹¹

2.3 Florence Nightingale

- 48 Florence Nightingale's letters to Sidney Herbert, the Secretary at War, denounced the conservative resistance to sanitary reform of the army doctors and the administration led by Dr Hall (who criticised⁹² her work) and the poor state of army hospitals in the East due to the lack of any central authority:

The Purveyor considers washing both of linen and of the men a minor "detail" and during the 3 weeks we have been there . . . no washing whatever has been performed for the men either of body-linen or of bed-linen except by ourselves . . . when we came here, there was neither basin, towel nor soap in the wards . . . the consequence of all this are fever, cholera, gangrene, lice, bugs, fleas—& may be erysipelas—from the using of one sponge among many wounds . . . the fault here is, not with the medical officers, but in the separation of the department which affords every necessary supply, except medicines, to them⁹³
the buildings [at Scutari] were spacious and magnificent in external appearance . . . underneath these great structures were sewers of the worst possible construction, loaded with filth . . . the wards had no means of ventilation; the walls required constant lime-washing, and the number of sick crowded into the hospitals, during the winter of 1854–55 was disproportionately large.⁹⁴

- 49 All her observations about the defects in hospitals (especially overcrowding and lack of ventilation) and their causes were upheld⁹⁵ by the Sanitary Commission headed by Drs Sutherland and Gavin which arrived in the Crimea in March 1855. Her correspondence also confirms that the ships of the Army Transport Service were crammed full,⁹⁶ badly ventilated, dirty, thus causing great mortality among troops. The Supply Service was unable to supply regiments and hospitals with essential provisions⁹⁷ and medicines:

I learn that, while our men come back to us ragged, naked and starved, there is an immense quantity of warm clothing lying at Balaklava, not sent up to camp from difficulty of transport⁹⁸
I found the supply of medicines very inadequate, from the first moment we landed

at Varna. I was constantly spoken to by the surgeons themselves who said that there was great difficulty from the want of medicine. . . it appeared to me that there was a great terror of the Head of the Medical Department. . . the grand object was that no blame was to be thrown upon the Head of the Medical Dpt.⁹⁹

- 50 She rightly thought that the dietary regime of troops was inappropriate: salt meat constituted the core of it, vitamins, vegetables and rice remained scarce. Her letters also enable us to ascertain the real character of the nurses who were employed in military hospitals; they repeatedly point to the moral and professional defects¹⁰⁰ of many of these nurses. For example Nightingale was forced to issue strict injunctions about the need to remain sober and to avoid sexual relations:¹⁰¹

I am so sorry to be obliged to tell you that Thompson and Anderson, two of the Presbyterian nurses from Edinburgh, went out drinking with an orderly on Saturday night. Anderson was brought back dead drunk. But Thompson I believe to be the most hardened offender . . . it is a great disappointment, as they were hard-working good-natured women.¹⁰²

- 51 The lack of discipline, the insubordination of some nurses, their propensity to drunkenness are confirmed by a confidential army report¹⁰³ prepared by Colonel J. H. Lefroy, the scientific adviser to the War Secretary, issued in January 1855. Many nurses came from humble backgrounds; some were even “immoral women”.

2.4 Parliament & Government Reports

- 52 The reports of Parliamentary commissions also helped to clarify the situation and remedy deficiencies: in January 1855, John Arthur Roebuck, a Member of Parliament, asked the House of Commons to set up a select committee to inquire into the condition of the army before Sebastopol. There was a general demand for information about the conduct of the war in Britain. The Roebuck committee began its interviews in March 1855; it was an open committee; many people attended and it was covered by the press¹⁰⁴ which published the evidence everyday. For example it highlighted the deficiencies of the supply system and the poor condition of cavalry men and their horses:

. . . The roads [to the camp] were in a most dreadful condition –up to the knees in mud . . . the men were eating their food raw. He saw them doing it. The horses were in a most miserable state. They could not have made a charge. They did not seem to have a gallop in them. The Scots Gray were particularly wretched. He never saw horses in such a state. In one brigade 28 horses died in one night. The men were very ragged, badly shed, and dirty; they were very lousy, overrun with vermin.¹⁰⁵

- 53 It confirmed¹⁰⁶ Florence Nightingale’s observations about the inadequate hospital accommodation. Most of the witnesses showed “that the blame for mismanagement fell not upon individuals but on the system for which both political parties and Parliament were responsible,”¹⁰⁷ and that Lord Aberdeen and his Cabinet in 1854 had been unfairly blamed:

the Administration which ordered that expedition had no adequate information as to the armament of the forces in the Crimea . . . they hoped and expected the expedition to be immediately successful and, as they did not foresee the probability of a protracted struggle, they made no preparation for a winter campaign.¹⁰⁸

- 54 Internal army reports tend to confirm that Lord Raglan was a good administrator and staff officer. They show that he cared a lot about the condition of his men and that he tried to do his best to alleviate their sufferings:

I consider Lord Raglan the most abused man I ever heard of . . . how he gets through all that he does is wonderful . . . his correspondence is far beyond what

any man can get through . . . I see no staff officer objectionable in my opinion . . .
you will see my views very different from those printed in our newspapers.¹⁰⁹

55 He was simply badly assisted by a poor army administration and an organization that had been framed for stationery service in the colonies, not for operations in the field. He was unfairly blamed for political mistakes and the unrealistic strategic expectations of the government.

56 In March 1856, an army inquiry¹¹⁰ was set up to assess the responsibilities of some top officers in the Crimea, such as the Commissary-General Filder. It appears that the staff employed in the Commissariat (a civil department of the Army which did not employ military officers) tended to abide blindly by administrative rules that seemed absurd and inappropriate in the Crimea:

gentlemen were sent to me as commissaries who were totally incompetent for their duty. I dare say they were very good clerks in the Treasury but I found immediately that they knew nothing about their field duty, and that they did not care much about it¹¹¹

I had the horses of my own staff absolutely deprived, I think, for almost a day, on one occasion, of all provisions, because, forsooth, there was not somebody ready to sign a document as to the qualification and requirement, in an official manner.

These forms were rigidly demanded, and I think, not necessarily so.¹¹²

57 The army inquiry also interviewed Lucan and Cardigan, and General Airey. The *Times* gave full reports of their hearings by a board of general officers. It was an opportunity for the *Times* to reassert the incompetence of the former commanding officers of the cavalry division:

"They slander me", cries Lord Cardigan, under the censure of the Crimean Commissioners' report. Lord Lucan echoes the complaint. It is curious enough to see these two noblemen, who have been so freely flinging dirt on each other, now making common cause against the report, or rather the evidence which inculpates both . . . but, assuming that a decoration was due to the gallantry of Lord Cardigan in the Balaklava charge, the question remains why the Inspectorship of Cavalry was given to an officer who, however brave, had signally and disastrously proved his unfitness for the care of horses.¹¹³

58 Yet, in the end, despite all these official inquests, there was no major change in the army leadership or in its methods of administration. Although Roebuck had demanded responsible ministers should be severely reprehended, this suggestion was not carried through. By March 1855 the war was going better and the end of the siege of Sebastopol was thought to be in sight. The new PM, Lord Palmerston, conducted urgent reforms¹¹⁴ in the ministries supplying the army and received a large share of the credit for winning the war, although it is the Aberdeen government that had actually initiated most of the important measures to remedy the situation (a better supply service, better food and more winter clothes for the men, a better sanitary and hospital service,¹¹⁵ the construction of a railway line between Balaklava and the British camp, the recruitment of supplementary troops for the Crimea).

Conclusion

59 The major difficulty for present researchers in analyzing the representation of the Crimean war comes from the fact that both the Government and the Press changed their views about the war and the army between 1854 and 1856; these fluctuating views, reflected in government papers and press articles, and largely dictated by political and (in the case of the press) editorial motives, contrast with the constant and fairly accurate accounts by the individuals engaged in the war. Moreover historians of the war are themselves divided about this representation: many books are partial and search for identifiable culprits (Raglan, Nightingale, the Army, the Government, the Press . . .).

But none is satisfactory: it may mean that the responsibility of the disaster in the Crimea lay with the whole British nation not with a few particular individuals.

60 Even if the Press had a great responsibility in the contemporary misrepresentation of the Crimean war, it remains that it undeniably provided an essential highlight of this major historical event: this confusing paradox was amply shown in this paper. It has also become a recurrent feature of our contemporary information society: the bias of the press and news management by the British government were observed again later, in subsequent wars like the Boer War.

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[Texte intégral]

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